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ABSTRACT

Relationships between distal and proximal situation characteristics on the one hand and parental child-rearing values and behaviors on the other were explored. Participating voluntarily were 293 Dutch families with an aggregate of 703 children whose ages ranged from 4 through 18 years. Data were collected in interviews and via questionnaires. Discussion of findings focuses on (1) correlations between social class variables, parental child-rearing value orientations, and parental disciplinary behavior; and (2) correlations between social class variables and parental child rearing value orientations in problematic and non-problematic situations. It is concluded that proximal situation characteristics such as parental perceptions and reactions seem to be so influential that the proposition of a general relationship between social class and child rearing values needs to be reconsidered. (RH)

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SOCIAL CLASS AND PARENTAL SITUATION PERCEPTIONS AS DETERMINANTS OF PARENTAL VALUE ORIENTATIONS AND BEHAVIORS

GERRIS, J.R.M., VERMULST, A.A., FRANKEN, W.M., JANSSENS, J.M.A.M.

1. *INTRODUCTION*

In the long history of socialization research most of the interest has been directed on the influences of parental factors such as social class, attitudes and believes on the child's development. Much less attention has been given to the description and explanation of parental behavior per se. According to an interactionistic point of view the child-rearing situation as it is perceived and reacted upon is important to understand why parents act as they do. It is the subject's interpretation of the situational frame of reference and the continuously flow of situational cues and events offered to him which determines his acts (Magnusson, 1981). The situation as it is perceived (Magnusson, 1981) is also described as behavioral environment (Koffka, 1935), beta-press (Murray, 1938), life space (Lewin, 1936), the subjective situation (Magnusson, 1978) and as the functional situation (Block & Block, 1981). Pervin (1977) distinguishes between a distal (i.e. objective) situation, and a proximal (i.e. subjective) situation.

In this study relationships between distal and proximal situation-characteristics on the one hand and parental child-rearing values and behaviors on the other hand are explored. With respect *to distal* determinants there is ample evidence for social class (as a distal-structural situation) influencing parental values and behavior. One of the most consistent findings is that lower class families make more use of physical punishment for disciplining and controlling the child than do middle-class or upper class families, while there is on the other hand generally a strong positive relationship between social class and the use of reasoning (induction) (Gecas, 1979). Kohn (1959; 1963) found a consistent positive relationship between social class and the parental value of self-direction and a negative relationship with conformity. According to Gecas (1979, p. 382) there is however no direct evidence for the relationship between parental values and parental behavior.

With respect *to proximal* or subjective situation characteristics Kohn's (1969) reference tot situational conditions in order to detail social-class differences in parenting is important. From research on this topic it can be concluded that middle-class parents are more likely to respond to the child on basis of their interpretation of the child's intent or motive, while lower class parents are more likely to respond on the basis of the child's overt act (cf. Gecas, 1979; Gecas & Nye, 1974).

When the influence of situational conditions thus is conceptualized in terms of parental beliefs or attributions, it is implied that these beliefs are largely determined by social class.

As a consequence the relationships between social class, parental values of self-direction versus conformity and parental behavior is assumed to be valid across different, proximal situations.

In this study it is tested (a) whether there is a link between parental values and parental behavior which is compatible with Kohn's rationale and (b)

whether the relationships between social class and parental child-rearing values will be attenuated or strenghthened as a result of a clustering of parents in terms of their subjective perceptions of and preferred reactions in their own child-rearing situations. In other words, whether proximal situation-specific perception of child-rearing situations can be considered as an influential factor as are distal, social class differences.

2. *METHOD*

Subjects

293 Dutch families (white) participated voluntarily. There were 2.4 children on the average in a family. There were a total of 703 children in the families, the children's ages ranging from 4 till 18 years. Both the main caregiver and her/his spouse participated in this study. The average age of the main caregiver was 38.3 years (s.d.=5.5), the average age of the spouse was 40.5 years (s.d.=6.1). The educational level of the main caregiver averaged at 4.6 on a scale from 1 (low) tot 9 (high), for the spouse the average was 5.6.

The average occupational levels for the main caregivers and their spouse were 2.8 and 3.9 respectively on a scale from 1 (low, unskilled) to 5 (high). For both scales use is made of a standard scale (Westerlaak et al., 1975). The analyses are based on the main caregiver data.

Procedure

The parents were interviewed at home by 26 interviewers (graduate students) who had received a special training in and feedback on try-outs of adminstering the set of measures. The administration of the respective measures took place in the evening on a time that was convenient for the parents. The whole procedure lasted about 2.5 to 3 hours. The parents reactions on both the semi-structured interview and the 16 hypothetical discipline-situations were tape-recorded for later transcription and coding. After these interviews the remaining measures were filled out by both parents independently.

Measures

Social-demographic information was collected from all families during the initial home visit and included a) year born, b) marital status, c) spouse's age, d) number and age of child(ren), e) education of caregiver and spouse, f) occupation level and occupational conditions of (ex-)spouse and caregiver g) religious and political affiliation.

Child-rearing situation perception interview. In this semi-structured interview the parents were asked to mention child-rearing situations. For each situation the parent had to rate its occurence and the degree in which the situation was perceived as problematic. Further information was gathered about the situational antecedents and consequences, the time and place (setting) of the problematic situation, the child involved, the way the problematic situation was solved by the parent. All situation descriptions were categorized by 4 raters with an average of 80% agreement.

Parental discipline behaviors were collected by presenting each parent (in a random order) 16 hypothetical disciplinary situations. The interviewer told that (s)he was interested in how parents react to children's actions, emphasizing that there were no right or wrong answers. Three questions

were put: (1) what/how do you feel in such a situation? (2) what do you do or say in such a situation? and (3) why do you do or say that? Parental discipline reactions were coded by means of a detailed coding system (Janssens, Janssen, Bernaerts & Gerris, 1985). This coding system is an elaboration of the system used by Grusec and Kuczinsky (1980). The main categories of the coding system are: power-assertion (e.g. use of verbal or physical violence), love-withdrawal, and induction-resoning (e.g. indicating the consequences of the child's misbehavior for other persons involved, explaining to the child that (s)he caused the other's distress). The average inter-rater agreement between three raters was 80% (range 75%-84%).

The Parental child-rearing value orientation scale consisted of three reliable dimensions or subscales, obtained after item- and factor analyses. (1) *Conformity*, indictating the degree in which the child is expected to adjust to demands, rules and values of the parent, the family and society (α=.80), (2) *Personal involvement*, indicating the degree the parent feels personally involved in child-rearing and the degree (s)he perceives child-rearing contributing to her/his development as a person (α=.83), (3) *Child-rearing as a burden*, indicating the degree in which child-rearing is experienced by the parent as a burden or as an impediment for her/his personal development (α=.83).

3. *RESULTS*

The correlations between social-class variables, parental child-rearing values and parental behaviors are summarized in table 1. Both indices of social class (educational and occupational level) are negatively related to conformity and personal involvement. Both educational and occupational level appear also related in the same vein to the use of power-asssertion (see table 1). Compared to the correlations between social class and parental behaviors the correlations between social class and parental values are rather high.

Table 1 Correlations between social class variables, parental child-rearing value orientations and parental disciplinary behavior

	EL	OL	C	PI	CR-B	PA-H	I-H
Social class variables							
Educational level (EL)	-						
Occupational level (OL)	55***	-					
Parental child-rearing value orientations							
Conformity (C)	-29***	-24***	-				
Personal Involvement (PI)	-33***	-26***	43***	-			
Child-rearing as a Burden (CR-B)		00	-08	00	00		
Parental Disciplinary Behaviors							
Power Assertion in hypothetical situations (PA-H)	-18**	-19**	27***	17**	00		
Induction in hypothetical situations (I-H)	13*	16**	-09**	-11*	-05*	-57***	-

Note: n = 293. Decimal points have been omitted *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

From table 1 it is apparent that the parental values of conformity and personal involvement are significantly positive correlated with use of power-assertion.

In table 2 two correlation matrices are integrated:

(A) The below-diagonal correlations between social class variables and parental child-rearing values pertain to situations of type A. That is, those patterns of parenting which are characterized first by perceiving those child-rearing situations as not very problematic and second by solving these situations rather straightforward by means of power assertion. This combinations of situation perception and power assertion was found in 239 of the 686 problematic child-rearing situations, which resulted from the child-rearing situation perception interview. These situations pertain to going to bed, tasks in the household, rules about time, rule transgressions on purpose.

(B) The above diagonal correlations between social class and child-rearing values pertain to situations of type B. That is, those patterns of parenting which are characterized by perceiving those child-rearing situations as rather problematic and by solving those situations by means of induction and reasoning. This combination of situation perception and induction was found in 84 child-rearing situations. These situations pertain to problems with smoking- and alcohol habits of the child, problematic social interactions caused by others, personal characteristics of the child which are perceived by the parent as causing trouble.

Table 2 Correlations between social-class variables and parental child-rearing value orientations in situations of type A[1] (below diagnonal) and in situations of type B[2] (above diagonal)

	EL	C	PI	CR-B
Social class variables				
Educational Level (EL)	-	-01	-04	02
Parental Child-rearing value orientations				
Conformity (C)	-35***	-	30**	18
Personal Involvement (PI)	-42***	52***	-	-16
Child-Rearing as a Burden (CR-B)	-16*	23**	12	-

Note: n = 239 below diagonal *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001
n = 84 above diagonal **p < .01

1 Type A-situations are child-rearing situations which are perceived as not very problematic and which are approached by power-assertive parental behavior.

2 Type B-situations are child-rearing situations which are perceived as very problematic and which are approached by induction and reasoning.

As can be seen in table 2 the below-diagonal correlations not only show the same pattern as in table 1, but the correlations between educational level and child-rearing values appear to be strenghthened as can be inferred from the higher coefficients in table 2. This finding indicates that the proximal characteristics of the type-A-situations go together with a more pregnant negative relationship between educational level and child-rearing values.
The above-diagonal correlations show a very different pattern. The respective correlations are near zero (see table 2). Apparently, in rather problematic child-rearing situations which are solved by induction and reasoning a distal feature of the situation like educational level is no longer predictive for more or less conformity, personal involvement and experiencing child-rearing as a burden.
This finding indicates that the proximal characteristics of the type-B-situations go together with a substantive attenuation of the relationships between educational level and child-rearing values.

4. *DISCUSSION*

First the possibility should be considered that the pattern of correlations presented in table 2 can be accounted for by the fact that either in type A or type B situations lower respectively higher educational levels are overrepresented. If this whould be the case, the findings in table 2 would be an artefact of the procedure of clustering on basis of proximal characteristics of situations.
This possibility is checked by comparing both situational clusters of parents as is done in table 3. On basis of table 3 it may be concluded that there is no reason to assume that in either type of situations particular levels of social class are outnumbered.

Table 3 Comparison of parental social class variables between type A-situations[1] and type B-situations[2]

	Type A-situations		Type B-situations	
	median	range	median	range
Education level main caregiver	4.44	8.00	4.50	8.00
Educational level spouse	6.35	8.00	6.58	8.00
Occupational level main caregiver	2.71	5.00	2.88	5.00
Occupational level spouse	3.39	5.00	3.39	5.00

[1] en [2] see notes at table 2.

The results thus far indicate:
1) that the expected relationships between social class variables, child-rearing values and parental behavior can be supported;
2) that the relationships between parental values and discipline behavior is further documented in line with Kohn's rationale;

3) that proximal situation characteristics such as parental perceptions and reactions seem to be so influential that the proposition of a general relationship between social class and child-rearing values needs to be reconsidered.

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